

Charles James #93  
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Q: Mr. James, let me ask you first, when did you first join the Army?

A: November 3, 1940.

Q: How did you get into the [Army] Air Corps?

A: Well, this was right after that, in 1940 they came through with that initial I think it was 12 months training that was going to be required of all young men at that time, and my name was right up there. I was going to be in the next bunch to go into the Army and I... there were three other friends there in the same block there in my home town. We all decided to join the Army Air Corps.

We went down and the only thing open was the Hawaiian Department. So we all joined and a month later we were on Oahu.

Q: So pretty quickly then you got here?

A: Oh yes.

Q: What kind of duties were you first given when you got to Hickam?

A: Just routine maintenance at that time. Uh, Hickam Field was pretty much of a show place and there was a lot of maintenance to be done on the grounds and I was with the lawn mowers and just routine maintenance of the field. Then I went on to mechanics school. Then was assigned to flight line mechanic.

Q: When did you first get assigned to the flight line?

A: Approximately, September 1, 1940.

Q: What sort of airplanes did you work on?

A: We had B-18's and B-17's.

Q: How would you compare the two airplanes?

A: Well the B-18 was nothing more than a DC-3 that had been converted to a bomber, a two-engine airplane; whereas the B-17 was a 4-engine flying fortress. And those that we had were the Model B's and didn't have any tail gunner. It was really a faster ship than the later Model E's and but of course the Model E with the tail gun was more effective in combat.

Q: What was would daily routine be like just say the week or so before the December 7th attack?

A: Well, the daily routine? Well, reveille was at 6 AM and that is six days a week. There was not reveille on Sunday. And of course you go to breakfast and report back to the flight line. I've forgotten the time really. Seems to me it was around 7:00 and we were usually through and relieved of duty late in the afternoon around 4 or 4:30.

Q: What sort of work would you do in a normal day there as a flight line mechanic?

A: Well, we had the routine repairs to make and if there were no repairs, many times I flew with the pilots on the training missions. We had bombing missions. We had a practice bombing up on Kauai and many times they just... it was fun to go on those and watch the bombs and see how close they could come to the targets. But, it was.... oh, there was one other thing, yeah. We had a... what was that called... a ground defense training, where we were trained to use, I don't know, there was about two dozen of us in the squadron assigned to that. We were trained in the use of the old Springfield rifle and bayonets, and machine guns (ground machine guns), .30-caliber and we went through that training. When we finished that we were able to detail strip the guns and put them back together again and we never did fire them, but we had just completed that around the 1st of December.

And then I remember we were put on alert. We had had alerts in the past and whenever in the past, whenever we had an alert, why well everybody was just on 24-hour duty; on the flight line, everyplace, wherever your duty was. But this time it started out the same way, but then finally it just relaxed. But the alert was not called off. But it just went... you know, back to the routine schedule again.

And on Sunday, everybody... I, December 7th, I was just laying there in my bunk reading the newspaper. The newspaper boy came through the barracks every Sunday and that's where I was December 7th when it all started.

Q: What was the first thing that you noticed that let you know that something was happening?

A: Well, we heard those explosions over Pearl Harbor. I was up on the 3rd floor of the barracks. I could see most of Pearl Harbor from the barracks window. I remember hearing some fellow saying, "What do you know! The Navy's having maneuvers on Sunday." and so I walked over there and I saw a big twin-engine biplane coming up after and smoke coming from battleship row, and black smoke, and a lot of it. And I saw this twin-engine biplane and I'd never seen a twin-engine biplane before. I knew it wasn't ours. I was a pretty good student of airplanes at that time. And I couldn't imagine what such an airplane could be. I'd never seen one, and certainly there was nothing in the American Armed Forces with anything like that. I knew something was wrong (laughter).

But I stood there watching it for a few minutes and saw these other airplanes, they were too far away for me to see the insignias on them. But finally two came across at a very low altitude. I'd say no more than 100 feet, right across Pearl

Harbor and right across Hickam and within a city block of our barrack, and that's when I recognized the Japanese.... I knew it was a Jap plane. They were both Zekes, Japanese Zekes.

And they bombed one of the hangars and I saw those big hangar doors blow up just like barrels. One door fell on a sentry walking across there. And that's when everybody cleared out of the barracks. Somebody had a radio on there and (whistle), "Oahu was being attacked by hostile aircraft. Everybody take cover." We weren't.... well, we had no other warning.

Q: What did you do at that point?

A: Well, I wasn't even dressed yet. I went over and got dressed, very hurriedly of course and went downstairs and got outside. Our barracks was a poured cement building and was very strong and I probably would have been better off staying inside.

But I went over near, it was across the street where they were building a new theater, and they had poured the foundation for this theater and had the wall up about three feet. It was about 12 inches thick, pouted concrete, and about 3 feet high or a little less. But I... there wasn't any, I thought were tracks(?). I tried to figure out what we could do.

But most of the activity at that time was over in Pearl Harbor. There wasn't much around. The Jap planes had come down and strafed. You could see their tracers, and I was sitting here on that wall and was thinking about an article that I had read in the Saturday Evening Post about somebody in England who had given advice to people who were in air raids. The thing to do was to get in one safe place and stay there and not move; not to start running around. And I thought, when I looked down that corner, if I got in that corner I would have 12 inches of concrete on two sides of me at least. There wasn't any place you could go underground on Hickam. It was just practically at sea level, and I thought 12 inches of concrete was pretty good protection on two sides of me.

So I stayed right there and more than an hour passed I believe and it seemed to be kind of a lull in the activity. The (axis??) weren't around for awhile and then it all started again. And it was during that second part, after that little lull, that must have lasted 12-15 minutes or maybe longer, that Hickam really caught it from then on; mainly from high altitude bombers. They were coming from the west in a perfect V-formation. I was admiring their formation.

Q: About how many of them were in a V?

A: Seven. And it looked to me like when the lead plane dropped his bomb, the other six all dropped theirs. Because the bombs... you could see the bombs coming down in a V, and I still think that's the way they did it. Or else he maybe called them on the radio and they all dropped them because they all came down together from all seven airplanes.

And most of them was fragmentation bombs because they didn't make any big craters. The... most of the buildings there were all cement but they really tore big chunks out of the buildings. I mean pieces of cement as big as your head from the side of the building where those fragments of those bombs hit.

And I remember one time I just happened to look up and here was a bomb coming. I thought it was going to hit me between the eyes, and I was sitting on this wall. If I hadn't thought ahead of time about diving down in that corner, I might have gone to the other side because it was kind of coming at an angle. But I went down in that corner and that bomb hit right on the other side and the dirt and rocks and everything came right down on top of me, but I didn't get a scratch. But there was a big crater there on the other side.

And I figured no two bombs are going to hit in the same spot. So I jumped over the wall into that crater which was about three feet deep and that was, I was below ground level and would escape those fragmentation bombs. And that's where I stayed the whole rest of the... until it was all over.

Q: What was going through your mind during all that time? How were you feeling?

A: Well, I was, all the time I was thinking where could I get a weapon and what could I do to combat these guys, especially at low level. You could do that with small arms but there was just wasn't any. We were so ill prepared and we had no live ammunition around that anybody could get to.

There was I remember, two fellows in my squadron, did break down the door in the armament training school, which was about a block away, and they managed to get an old water-cooled machine gun out of the school there. And it had some ammunition and they had that set up out there in that baseball diamond and were firing that. But as far as I know, that's the only gun I know that I heard of anybody getting out, was that old gun that was in that school.

Q: What was the aftermath of the attack like? What did you do after the attack was over?

A: Well, let's see. I don't think I did much of anything. I mean I remember I helped one fellow who was wounded. We had a new hospital there in Hickam. I don't think they had even opened it yet. But it was open when I helped this one man who had... he was bleeding badly from his side and I put his arm up over my shoulder and walked him all the way over there. It was about two blocks away. I got him inside the door and those nurses grabbed him right away and started, I don't know, what they did because I turned around and left.

But I know there were a few cars there in the parking lot across from the barracks that were burning. The fire station down on the corner was burning and the fire trucks were burning inside the station there. Because one of my friends lived above the fire station there. There was also the MP [*Military Police*] station above the fire station, and Fred was in the MP's and I was wondering how he made out. Finally, it was several days before I found him.

But that night I remember I slept in a car with somebody. We stayed out of the barracks. They passed the word around for everybody to stay out of the barracks.

Q: Why was that?

A: I don't know. It was.... things were just too disorganized

at the time. I do remember after it got real dark that night, suddenly somebody, I don't whether it was in Pearl Harbor or in Hickam but somebody fired a machine gun and I think every machine gun on that end of Oahu started firing, because the sky just lit up with tracers just like the 4th of July and I think it was just a couple of our Navy planes coming in for a landing. They thought they were Japs, or what it was, but they weren't taking any chances.

But I don't even remember what I did the next morning really, because that day, the previous day, the day before, we had had aircraft inspection out on the flight line and of course all the airplanes had to be lined up in perfect rows and that's the way they were December 7th; perfect targets.

And well I don't know how many survived if any did that were on that flight line. I'm not sure any did because the next day, it was the first time that I had ever seen a B-17E and they had been coming in right during the raid from the States. And they were all painted in olive drab, War time paint jobs. Whereas before all of our airplanes were unpainted with bright shiny aluminum.

And we of course dispersed all the airplanes out through the field beyond the runway so they wouldn't be as good targets. And I was assigned to one of the new B-17E's. That's about all there is to it. I certainly didn't contribute much to defending ourselves against the...

Q: Well, I don't know if there was much of anything anyone could have done.

A: No, that's true (laughter). We were terribly ill-prepared at the time.

Q: Well thank you. I appreciate your giving me some of your time here.

A: That's alright. I just hope I can be of some help. What are you going to do, write a book about December 7th or...

Q: Well... (tape ends)